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ABSTRACT

While it can be inferred from the literature that intelligent women are often perceived differently than are intelligent men, it remains unclear which individuals are and are not threatened by intelligent men and/or women. To explore parameters affecting the perception of an intelligent other person as threatening, 202 college students were presented with written vignettes portraying a highly intelligent male (John) or female (Joan). Students were asked to rate the two on threat, likeability, admirability, and adjustment. Results showed that regardless of gender, individuals low in intellectual self-esteem (ISE) were significantly more threatened by an intellectually superior person. Men, overall, had higher ISE scores. Masculine-typed and androgynous persons were less threatened than feminine-typed and indeterminate persons. Men low in general self-esteem (GSE) were more threatened by either John or Joan. Further research is needed to determine why individuals low in ISE do not react similarly to men and to women. (JAC)

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FEELING THREATENED INTELLECTUALLY: THE ROLE OF GENDER, SEX ROLE, SELF-ESTEEM

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Feeling Threatened Intellectually:

The Role of Gender, Sex Role, Self-Esteem

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Abstract

To test whether being threatened by an intelligent other is a function of the perceiver's gender, level of intellectual self-esteem (ISE), sex-role orientation and the gender of the stimulus person (SP) perceived, male (n = 100) and female (n = 102) undergraduates were presented with written vignettes portraying either a highly intelligent male (John) or female (Joan). An 11-item intellectual self-esteem scale, developed especially for this study, was embedded in the PRF ANDRO Scale which measures Masculinity, Femininity, and general self-esteem (GSE). Subjects were asked to rate the SP's social stimulus value on an objective questionnaire containing the following four dependent measures derived from a factor analysis: Threat, Likeability, Admirability and Rated Adjustment. A 2 X 2 X 2 ANOVA indicated that, regardless of one's own gender or that of the SP, individuals low in ISE were markedly and significantly more threatened by an intellectually superior person than their high ISE counterparts. Moreover, men overall had significantly higher ISE scores than did women. As predicted, masculine-typed and androgynous persons were significantly less threatened than were feminine-typed and indeterminate persons. Individuals low in ISE found John relatively less likeable and less admirable than they did Joan. Although it was expected that men and women low in ISE would differ in their threat reactions to John and Joan, such a differential reaction emerged with regard to general self-esteem (GSE). Men low in GSE were simply more threatened by either SP than those who were high in GSE. Low and high GSE females were indistinguishable in their threat reactions regarding John. Regarding Joan, however, females with high GSE were relatively the least threatened group whereas those low in GSE comprised the most threatened group.

Many women have grown up with the experience of being told that if they act "too smart" it will be difficult for them to "catch a man." Conversely, most men appear to have been encouraged to be intelligent, successful, competent and assertive. That the ramifications for female competence may be extensive is suggested in the finding that the most successful women are more likely to remain single, whereas the opposite is true for men -- highly successful men tend to marry and the least successful men do not (Bernard, 1972).

An overall review of the literature on sex-role stereotypes, achievement motivation and performance evaluation suggests that there are both women and men who are threatened by intelligent competent females. Moreover, it can be inferred from the literature that intelligent women are often perceived differently from intelligent men. Since little attention has been paid to individual differences in beliefs, attitudes, behaviors and perceptions, it remains unclear which individuals are and are not threatened by intelligent women and/or men. The four-fold categorization of sex roles, however, in which Masculinity and Femininity are conceptualized as orthogonal dimensions (Bem, 1974; Berzins, 1975; Spence, Helmreich & Stapp, 1975), yields information along a number of individual difference dimensions. As one of these dimensions, self-esteem offers a particularly cogent area for conceptualizing differences among individuals who are and are not threatened by intellectually superior women and/or men. Presumably, if one is intellectually secure, one will not feel threatened by the intellectual accomplishments of another.

The present study was designed to explore parameters affecting the perception of an intelligent other person as threatening. Threat was defined as an individual's idiosyncratic perception of a situation as potentially harmful to his or her self-esteem. Thus it was distinguishable from dislike (i.e , to regard with displeasure, antipathy, or aversion) on a theoretical level since the latter term carries with it no implication of personal harm. It was expected that one dimension along which threat would vary would be intellectual self-esteem which was defined as a positive evaluation of one's own intellectual competence and thereby differentiated from the broader dimension of general self-esteem which reflects a favorability along social, emotional, sexual and generalized self-regard dimensions. Specifically, it

was hypothesized that females low in intellectual self-esteem (ISE) would be threatened by an intelligent female stimulus person (SP) but would be relatively less threatened by a male SP since socialization fosters an attitude that males should be the smarter sex. Male low in ISE, however, were expected to be threatened by intelligent SPs of both sexes, and perhaps more so by a female SP. Regardless of sex, individuals with high intellectual self-esteem were expected to be relatively less threatened than their low ISE counterparts.

In the present study, general self-esteem, in addition to intellectual self-esteem, was deemed important for conceptualizing differences among individuals who would and would not be threatened by intellectually superior others. Moreover, since the literature on psychological sex roles indicates that the masculine component is primarily responsible for contributing to high self-esteem (Bem, 1977; Wetter, 1975), it was predicted further that feminine-typed and indeterminate individuals would be more threatened by intelligent others than would their masculine-typed and androgynous counterparts.

One hundred male and 102 female undergraduates in introductory psychology at the University of Kentucky were presented with written vignettes portraying either a highly intelligent male (John) or female (Joan) stimulus person (SP). An 11-item intellectual self-esteem scale, developed especially for this study, was embedded in the PRF ANDRO Scale (Berzins, Wetter, & Welling, 1978) which measures Masculinity, Femininity, and general self-esteem. Subjects were also asked to rate the SP's social stimulus value on an objective questionnaire containing the following four scales derived from a factor analysis: Threat, Likeability, Admirability and Rated Adjustment.

A 2 (male, female subject) X 2 (high vs. low ISE) X 2 (John, Joan) ANOVA revealed a powerful relationship between threat and intellectual self-esteem.

Regardless of one's own gender or that of the SP, individuals low in ISE were markedly and significantly more threatened by an intellectually superior person than were those high in ISE, $F(1, 192) = 40.38$, $p < .0001$. That this relationship held for general self-esteem as well, but was much more powerful for intellectual self-esteem, lends considerable support to the view that if one is intellectually insecure, one is particularly vulnerable to being threatened by the intellectual accomplishments of another. Since scores on the Threat scale proved almost totally uncorrelated with scores on the other three scales, the present study also demonstrates that it is quite possible to hold an individual in high regard and even desire to emulate that person, while at the same time finding him or her quite threatening. It is also important to note that for all subgroups, the average threat score exceeded the scale midpoint, indicating that differences were due to the relative degree of threat rather than to its absence.

The results of a t-test indicated that men's ISE scores were significantly higher than those of women, $t(319) = 4.95$, $p < .0001$. In light of the highly significant relationship between one's confidence regarding intellectual capabilities and the degree to which one is threatened by others who are intellectually competent, the importance of such a finding cannot be overstated. Relative to females, males feel much more comfortable in a variety of situations calling for displays of intellectual competence or, at the very least, feel a greater need to present themselves as intellectually secure. Such a finding lends credence to the theme of intellectual ascendancy as a key element comprising psychological masculinity (Berzins et al., 1978). It is not surprising, then, that the hypothesis that masculine-typed and androgynous individuals would be less threatened by John or Joan than their feminine-typed and indeterminate counterparts was unconditionally supported. If one scores high on the

dominant-instrumental dimension of masculinity, one is also more intellectually secure, and presumably is less vulnerable to feeling inadequate when presented with the intellectual accomplishments of another. Conversely, not only does an affiliative-expressive orientation add little to the favorability of one's general self-regard (Bem, 1977; Wetter, 1975), but it offers no buffer against being threatened by other individuals who are perceived as intellectually able.

Although it was expected that men and women low in ISE would differ in their threat reactions to John and Joan, such differential reactions emerged only with regard to general self-esteem (GSE). Men low in GSE were simply more threatened by either SP than those who were high in GSE. In contrast, low and high GSE females were indistinguishable in their threat reactions regarding John. Regarding Joan, however, females with high GSE were relatively the least threatened group whereas those low in GSE comprised the most threatened group. Evidently, women's GSE is much more implicated in the degree to which they are threatened by another woman, whereas for men, no such differential sensitivity is evident.

With regard to other dependent variables, individuals low in ISE found John relatively less likeable and less admirable than they did Joan. As in the threat analyses, all subgroups scored above the scale midpoints on Likeability and Admirability, indicating that differences were again a matter of relative degree. That John found relatively less favor than did Joan in the eyes of the low ISE group may perhaps be due to a perception of John as conforming to sex-role expectations in contrast to Joan who transcends them. John may arouse greater feelings of envy in people with low ISE because he represents the cultural embodiment of a competent, successful individual, whereas Joan could be regarded as more of a "fluke". Although these speculations appear plausible, further research is needed to determine why individuals low in ISE do not react

similarly to John as to Joan.

In summary, among the findings of this study it is apparent that perceptions of intellectually superior others as threatening is highly related to one's own intellectual self-esteem, that men have significantly higher ISE than do women, and that women's general self-esteem is implicated in the degree to which they are threatened by another woman.

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